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ABSTRACT

This analysis examined the percentage of teachers, both full-time and part-time, who left teaching positions, either to teach in other schools or to pursue other occupations. The study used data from the 1990-91 Schools and Staffing Survey, a national survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics. Findings included the following: (1) private schools experienced higher teacher turnover rates than did public schools; (2) public and private schools with the lowest enrollments (under 300 students) experienced the highest turnover rates; and (3) turnover rates were higher in public schools where half or more of the students enrolled received free or reduced-price lunches. Lower salaries and fewer benefits in small public and private schools may have contributed to higher turnover rates in those schools. For example, in small private schools the maximum salary for teachers averaged $22,509 compared to $32,727 in large private schools. In small public schools the average maximum salary was $35,317 compared to $42,421 in large public schools. Finally, in a 1991-92 follow-up study which included a sample of respondents to the 1990-91 survey who were no longer teaching, about 17 percent of former private school teachers reported dissatisfaction with teaching as a career due to poor salary. This compared to less than 1 percent of former public school teachers claiming poor salary who were also dissatisfied with teaching as an occupation. (JB)

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Issue Brief
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ISSUE BRIEF

Which Types of Schools Have the Highest Teacher Turnover?

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Which kinds of schools do teachers leave most often? Do public schools serving poor students, for example, have higher levels of teacher turnover than schools with fewer poor students enrolled? How do public and private schools differ in their teacher turnover rates? What school characteristics are associated with turnover? Are teachers' salaries related to the rates at which teachers leave schools? Data from the 1990-91 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), can be used to address these questions. This survey collected information on the percentage of teachers, both full-time and part-time, who recently left positions in their schools, either to teach in other schools or to pursue different occupations. Regardless of whether the exiting teacher moved within the same district, to another school elsewhere, or left teaching, the turnover meant a decrease in staff for that particular school and the probable need to hire a replacement.

In 1990-91, private schools experienced higher teacher turnover rates than did public schools.

Across elementary and secondary levels and central city to rural locations, teacher turnover rates were higher in private than in public schools in 1990-91 (table 1). At the elementary level, for example, the turnover rate for teachers in private schools was almost twice what it was in public schools. Similarly, in central cities, the turnover rate for teachers in private schools was almost double that for public schools.

Public and private schools with the lowest enrollments in 1990-91 experienced the highest teacher turnover rates.

Contrary to current thinking (e.g., Rosenholtz 1985), large public schools did not have the highest rates of teacher turnover in 1990-91 (table 1). In fact, these schools experienced lower turnover rates than did the smallest public schools (i.e., schools with fewer than 300 students). This pattern was even more pronounced in the private sector, where sites with the fewest students had almost twice the teacher turnover rates than the largest sites (i.e., those with 600 students or more). Generally, annual teacher turnover rates in the schools serving the most students were about 8-9 percent.

Teacher turnover rates were higher in public schools where half or more of the students enrolled received free or reduced-price lunches.

Schools with high concentrations of students receiving free or reduced-price lunches (i.e., 50 percent or more student recipients) had, on average, a teacher turnover rate of about 10 percent in 1990-91. The average turnover rate in public schools with lower concentrations of students receiving free or reduced-price lunches was approximately 8 percent.

Table 1. Mean teacher turnover rates, by selected school characteristics, 1990-91

Public	8.7
Level	
Elementary	8.6
Secondary	8.5
Combined	11.5
Size	
<300	10.3
300-599	8.2
≥600	7.7
Location	
Central city	9.0
Urban fringe	8.2
Rural	8.8
Free/reduced-price lunch recipients	
<20%	8.0
20-49%	8.7
≥50%	9.9
Private	15.8
Level	
Elementary	16.3
Secondary	12.6
Combined	15.9
Size	
<390	17.0
300-599	11.3
≥600	9.3
Location	
Central city	17.0
Urban fringe	14.8
Rural	15.4
Orientation	
Catholic	14.5
Other religion	17.3
Nonsectarian	14.4

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1990-91 Schools and Staffing Survey (School Questionnaire).

Lower salaries and fewer benefits in small public and private schools may have contributed to higher turnover rates for teachers in 1990-91.

SASS data suggest which school characteristics were related to high turnover rates in 1990-91. Generally speaking, public schools offered their teachers higher salaries and more benefits than did private schools. However, small schools (i.e., schools with fewer

than 300 students) in each sector offered teachers lower salaries and fewer benefits than their large school counterparts (i.e., 600 students or more). In small private schools, for example, the maximum salary for teachers, defined as the maximum step on the salary scale, averaged $22,509 in 1990-91 compared to $32,727 in large private schools (table 2); for small public schools, the average maximum salary was $35,317 compared to $42,421 in large public schools. In addition, of the three benefits commonly paid to teachers (medical, dental, and retirement plans), small private schools, on average, offered fewer than two of these benefits, while small public schools offered two and a half, on average. In contrast, large private schools offered 2.4 of these benefits on average, and the average among large public schools was 2.7 (table 2).

Table 2. Means of teacher turnover rates and of selected factors, by school sector and size

Number of students:	Public Schools Large (≥600)	Public Schools Small (<300)	Private Schools Large (≥600)	Private Schools Small (<300)
Characteristics				
% Teacher turnover	7.7	10.3	9.3	17.0
Size of faculty	56.0	14.4	55.0	10.0
% Faculty w/ <3 yrs. experience	11.8	13.5	13.3	22.0
% Faculty with M.A.	48.5	37.2	42.8	23.3
No. of paid benefits	2.7	2.5	2.4	1.5
Maximum salary	$42,421	$35,317	$32,727	$22,509

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1990-91 Schools and Staffing Survey (Public District and School Questionnaires).

An indication of the effects of differential salary and benefit levels for public versus private schools is provided by data from the 1991-92 NCES Teacher Followup Survey (TFS), which included a sample of respondents to the 1990-91 SASS teacher survey who were no longer teaching. About 17 percent of the former private school teachers responding to this TFS who also reported themselves dissatisfied with teaching as a career cited poor salary as one of the three main reasons for leaving the profession. This compares to less than 1 percent of former public school teachers who also reported themselves as dissatisfied with teaching as an occupation (Bobbitt, Leich, Whitener, and Lynch 1994).

The relationships among salaries, benefits, and turnover rates can be expected to affect the composition of faculty in public and private schools. In small private schools in 1990-91, where the turnover rate was 17 percent, teachers tended to be less experienced in the profession than those in large public schools. On average, 22 percent of the instructional staff in small private schools had less than 3 years of experience, compared to approximately 12 percent in large public schools (table 2). Also, teachers in small private schools were less likely on average to have earned advanced degrees than those in large public schools. Fewer than one-quarter of the staff in small private schools, for example, had earned at least a master's degree in 1990-91, while almost one-half of the teachers in large public schools had earned these degrees.

Discussion

Although some teacher turnover from schools may be unavoidable, normal, and even beneficial, high rates of turnover are of concern because they may indicate underlying problems and because in and of themselves, they can disrupt the effectiveness of the school program. For these reasons, data from the 1990-91 SASS raise important questions for education research and policy. If smaller schools are constrained by the salaries and employee benefits they can offer, what else might these schools emphasize about their environments to retain teachers? In addition to higher salaries and greater numbers of benefits, do large schools offer more opportunities for movement *within* the school and, for that reason, lead fewer teachers to feel the need to move on to new, outside opportunities? What can we learn from schools serving large percentages of poor students that have lower turnover rates than other schools serving similar students?

These relationships between school characteristics and teacher turnover provide a frame of reference for studies seeking to clarify factors related to teacher career development and the development of supportive school climates. Clearly, more research is needed on the specific influences that affect teachers' decisions to remain at their schools or in the profession. In addition, the consequences of high rates of teacher turnover for the students and remaining staff are important to describe as greater attention is paid to strengthening schools as learning communities.

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This **Issue Brief** was prepared by Richard Ingersoll and Robert Rossi, American Institutes for Research. To obtain standard errors or definitions of terms for this **Issue Brief**, or to obtain additional information about the 1990-91 Schools and Staffing Survey, contact Charles H. Hammer (202) 219-1330. To order additional copies of this **Issue Brief** or other NCES publications, call 1-800-424-1616.

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